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The Imperial Irish: Canada's Irish Catholics Fight the Great War, 1914-1918 by Mark G. McGowan. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. xix, 424 pp. \$39.95 CAD (cloth).

Reviewed by Hilary M. Carey

This fine book provides an eloquent and subtle account of the experience of the 'imperial Irish', those Irish Catholics who found that their participation in the Great War confirmed their loyalty to Canada and the Empire and supported the bid for Home Rule in Ireland. McGowan notes that 'buckets of ink' (p.32) have been spilled over the question of the relative strength of Irish nationalism among the settler Irish in Canada. This study makes every attempt to provide a counter narrative to the myth of Irish Canadian disloyalty and support for the radical fringe of Fenian sympathisers. The majority, McGowan asserts, followed their bishops and mainstream Irish Canadian politicians in seeking constitutional remedies for Irish grievances. This policy was not an innovation. Both the Irish and Scottish Catholic bishops in Canada supported 'the Empire's war' (p. 73) and this was rightly seen as an extension of that episcopal loyalty to the Crown that had supported the American Revolution and the War of 1812. If anything, the French bishops were even more committed loyalists, having openly supported the British conquest of New France in 1760, support that was rewarded by the creation of the first Catholic establishment in any British colony and civil rights for Catholics that were not enjoyed elsewhere in the Empire until after Catholic emancipation in 1829. From the beginning of the war, Catholic bishops exhorted their fellow Canadians to pray for peace and to share the burdens of Empire. Piety and patriotism in the Empire's time of need were uniformly endorsed by the Bishops, extolled by the Catholic newspapers and reflected in buoyant enlistment and generous donations to imperial war causes. Even the Easter Rising in Dublin in April 1916 did little to dent Catholic loyalty, and there was no equivalent in Canada to the savage divisions in Australia on the issue of conscription.

While rightly stressing the empire loyalism of Canadian Catholics, McGowan hints at dissenting voices, which were strangely silent during at least the first eighteen months of the war. These included the French Canadian nationalist Henri Bourassa, who was privately rebuked by the Anglophone bishops for questioning the extent of Canadian sacrifice for the British imperial war. The commitment to a united, pro-war stand among the bishops only began to unravel in 1916 when the war dragged on, and the extent of the casualties became apparent. Division between French and Irish Catholics was revealed most patently in the recruitment figures which showed that French Catholics were well behind Irish Catholics in their contribution to voluntary recruitment. McGowan provides a masterly reading of the statistical evidence for the influence of religious identity on recruitment, making fine distinctions between patterns in particular cities, parishes and battalions, further broken down by birthplace, marital status, occupation and previous military service. He points out that the 208th Toronto Irish Battalion had only 84 Irish Catholic recruits which was just 12.8% of the full strength of 658. Catholic women also enlisted to serve as nurses, as they had done in the South African War. In both the 'Irish' battalions and the nursing corps, those Catholics most likely to enlist were Canadian-born, more open, it would seem, to the siren song of empire loyalism being preached by the Irish Catholic bishops.

This is not just a book built on figures. It is more difficult to provide a statistical profile for the internal religious beliefs of Irish Catholic soldiers in the Great War, but McGowan provides a suggestive reading of their practice by interrogating the health records, specifically those for the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases. These indicate that young Catholics were just as likely to engage in high-risk activities, such as visiting prostitutes in ports of embarkation, as other men. This worried their pastors but also suggests that the moral

restraint provided by Catholic teaching did not restrict their access to the traditional, recreational pursuits of soldiers.

McGowan is at his subtle best when delineating the complex strains and varieties of Canadian Catholicism, with its many competing allegiances and loyalties. There are many enticing personal anecdotes which illustrate opposing views which could arise in the same family or even, as with the two John Patrick Meaghers, one who enlisted as soon as possible, another who held the war in contempt, who held the same name. The primary binary lay between Francophone and Anglophone Catholics, whose particular tussles over bilingual schooling, contests for the episcopacy and differing relationship to the British imperial idea simmered before, through and after the Great War. The influx of emigrants from Catholic and Orthodox Europe ensured there was no unanimity on the ideal peace in Europe, only that the pope should attempt to broker one. All these complex issues had to be addressed in the face of narrow-minded and largely ignorant Protestant hectoring about the pope's friendship with the Kaiser (untrue), the Irish refusal to enlist (also untrue) and the questionable patriotism of Catholic Canadians (unfair). While his sources are largely drawn from the Catholic press, McGowan argues convincingly that both laity and clergy in the Catholic Church in Canada regarded the Irish Rising as both foolish and disloyal. While there was a backlash following the brutal British response, which made martyrs of the rebels and undermined the liberal – and loyal – government of John Redmond, Canadian Catholics remained supportive of the parliamentary route to Home Rule. Home Rule would make Ireland rather like Canada – a dominion with intimate connections to the historical four kingdoms. The monument to their support for the Empire is marked in war memorials to the Catholic dead of Canada. As McGowan says, these public sculptures served to 'bind together the country's ethnic, religious and cultural communities', making everyone Canadian.

What emerges from McGowan's tale is a rich and nuanced account of a Canadian people, shaped by religion and empire and challenged by the greatest conflict of the twentieth century. Readers who are, like me, more familiar with the much more strident and divisive response to the war in Australia, fuelled by the opposition of the Irish-born Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, will find this a fascinating study in contrasts. It is well worth reading and should serve as a model for regional studies of religion, war and empire.